



*Viruses – not bacteria – cause colds, flu, and chest colds. Antibiotics kill only bacteria. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so they do not work for colds or flu.*

Colds, respiratory flu, and chest colds are common. In fact, many adults get two to four colds a year. The good news is that most people begin to feel better within a week or two. However, some symptoms, including a cough, can sometimes last up to three weeks. Home remedies may help ease symptoms while your body heals itself.

## Prevention

Here are some tips that may help prevent getting a cold or the flu in the first place:

- Wash your hands often or use alcohol-based hand gel.
- Try to avoid touching your face.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, manage your stress, and get plenty of rest.
- **The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a yearly flu shot** to protect against influenza.

A flu shot is safe and effective in preventing the flu. It will not give you the flu and has a very low rate of side effects.

If you have a severe allergy to eggs, discuss the flu shot with your physician.

Complications from colds and flu may be more severe for pregnant women and people with chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease and anyone 50 years or older.

## Stop flu from spreading

**For any flu-like illness:** Stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone without using fever-reducing medicine. If you need medical care or other necessities you can go out, but be careful not to expose others.

## Home remedies can help ease your symptoms

### For general relief

- Get extra rest.
- Drink lots of fluids. Hot herbal tea, warm water, or chicken soup are especially good for congestion (runny or stuffy nose).
- Take acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) or ibuprofen (such as Advil) for fever or body aches.
- If you smoke, this is a good time to quit. Ask your doctor or other medical professional how. Avoid other people's smoke. (You will lower your chances of getting sick again.)
- If you are considering an alternative approach, some studies suggest that Echinacea may decrease the length and severity of cold symptoms if you take it in the first few days that you experience symptoms. However, studies show that it does not prevent colds or flu.

Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions.

### For runny or stuffy nose

- Keep the inside of your nose moist with a salt-water solution such as saline nose drops or sprays (for example, Ocean Nasal Spray).
- Breathe warm, moist air from a steamy shower, hot bath, or sink filled with hot water.

- Use a decongestant nose spray like oxymetolazine (such as Afrin). Do not use it for more than three days at a time.
- Take a decongestant, like pseudoephedrine (such as Sudafed). If you have high blood pressure, consult with your doctor before taking pseudoephedrine.
- Apply moist heat (a warm, moist towel or gel pack) to your face three to four times a day for five to ten minutes each time.

### For a cough

- Use cough drops to soothe irritation.
- Drink lots of fluids, as described above.
- Use a cough suppressant containing dextromethorphan (such as Robitussin-DM).

### For a sore throat

- Gargle frequently with warm salt water. Mix 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 cup of warm water.
- Drink extra fluids.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil), or use over-the-counter throat lozenges to soothe soreness.
- Use a humidifier to add moisture to the bedroom.

### Pregnant women

Pregnant women are more likely to have complications or be hospitalized due to the flu. A prolonged fever can also be harmful to your baby. If you

develop the flu (rapid onset of symptoms, cough, congestion, fever, tired and achy feeling, etc.), take the following precautions:

- To bring down a fever, take acetaminophen (Tylenol) as directed on the bottle. Do not take aspirin or ibuprofen (Advil) during pregnancy.
- Call Kaiser Permanente if you have a fever of 100.4° F or higher with a cough for more than 2 days, a fever that doesn't respond to Tylenol, or a fever and signs that you are becoming dehydrated.

### Antibiotics will not help a simple cold, flu, or chest cold

Viruses and bacteria are germs that can make you ill. Viruses – not bacteria – cause colds, flu, and chest colds. Antibiotics kill only bacteria. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so they do not work for colds or flu.

- You may have used antibiotics before for a cold, flu, or chest cold. They may have seemed to work. However, chances are that your body would have recovered just as quickly on its own without them.
- It is common to have yellow or green mucus with a cold. Colored mucus does not mean you have a bacterial infection or need antibiotics.

Using antibiotics that you don't need can hurt you by:

- Increasing your chances of being infected by bacteria that antibiotics cannot kill.

- Causing side effects, like upset stomach, diarrhea, vaginal infection, rashes, and (rarely) life-threatening allergic reactions – even with the same antibiotics that you may have used before without any problems.

### Call Kaiser Permanente if you have ...

- Gotten better, and then symptoms come back again.
- Trouble breathing, wheezing, or tightness in your chest.
- A deep cough with lots of mucus or a cough that lasts more than 3 weeks.
- A very sore throat and a hard time swallowing.
- Severe ear pain, sudden hearing loss, or discharge from the ear.
- A fever of 100.4° F or higher for three days or more with a stiff neck, a severe headache, or a rash.

### Visit your Kaiser Permanente pharmacy

Over-the-counter medications are available to ease cold and flu symptoms. Alcohol-based hand gels are also available. Our pharmacists are available to assist you in selecting the product that best suits your needs.

#### Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.